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Year: 2016

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## Identity formation in unstable times

Brzezińska, Anna I ; Ciecuch, Jan

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18290/rpsych.2016.19.2-1en>

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ZORA URL: <https://doi.org/10.5167/uzh-182635>

Journal Article

Published Version



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Originally published at:

Brzezińska, Anna I; Ciecuch, Jan (2016). Identity formation in unstable times. *Annals of Psychology*, 19(2):213-220.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18290/rpsych.2016.19.2-1en>

ANNA I. BRZEZIŃSKA<sup>a</sup>JAN CIECIUCH<sup>b,c</sup><sup>a</sup>Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań

Institute of Psychology

<sup>b</sup>Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University in Warsaw

Institute of Psychology

<sup>c</sup>Universität Zürich

## IDENTITY FORMATION IN UNSTABLE TIMES

The process of adolescence, including identity formation, differs significantly from what it was in previous generations. This is a consequence, among other things, of the demographic and economic changes that have taken place in recent years, locally as well as globally. This introduction is devoted to a review of these problems, and the current issue comprises texts addressing selected questions in detail. Some scholars identify groups of young people characterized by a tendency to consciously avoid making commitments typical of adults. However, research results point to the positive impact of taking on adult roles on perceiving oneself as an adult. The person's identity develops from childhood, encompassing various domains. During the transition from childhood to adolescence, the increase in self-awareness is accompanied by an intensification of seeking information about oneself and one's own functioning and of making plans for the future. The stage of adulthood involves the verification of previously made choices by resuming exploratory activities, whose intensity is in proportion to the amount of significant changes in the individual's environment.

**Keywords:** identity domains; identity formation; sense of identity; self organization; self-authoring personality; attitudes toward globalization; early and late adolescence; early and late adulthood; social and educational context.

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Address for correspondence: ANNA I. BRZEZIŃSKA – Institute of Psychology, Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, ul. Szamarzewskiego 89AB, 60-568 Poznań; e-mail: [aibrzez@amu.edu.pl](mailto:aibrzez@amu.edu.pl)

The editorial work on the present issue was financed by grants 2011/03/B/HS6/01884 (Anna I. Brzezińska) and 2014/14/M/HS6/00919 (Jan Cieciuch) from the National Science Center, Poland.

The issues of personal identity and its role in the person's functioning were introduced into personality and developmental psychology by Erik H. Erikson (1950; cf. the analysis performed by Smykowski, 2016). His statements became the basis for many interesting research conceptions and approaches (cf. the review article: Schwartz, 2001) and a subject of empirical analyses, thanks to the model developed by James Marcia (1966). Numerous studies have shown that personal identity is undergoes dynamic changes not only in the period of adolescence but also in the successive stages of adulthood (e.g., Hatano, Sugimura, & Crocetti, 2016; Luyckx, Seiffge-Krenke, Schwartz, Crocetti, & Klimstra, 2014; Morsunbul, Crocetti, Cok, & Meeus, 2016; Tagliabue, Crocetti, & Lanz, 2015).

As a result of demographic and economic transformations that have taken place in recent years in Poland, in Europe, and in the world, the process of growing up, including identity formation, has changed significantly compared to previous generations (cf. Arnett, 2000, 2001; Bynner, 2005; Brzezińska, Czub, Hejmanowski, Kaczan, Piotrowski, & Rękosiewicz, 2012). Changes in the structure of the family and interpersonal relations, an increase in the mobility of all generations, the emergence of previously unknown opportunities of combining work with study and combining various forms of work – all this made it possible not only to choose but also to create one's own path of development, resembling neither the relatively stable path of previous generations nor the paths chosen or created by one's peers. This direction of change gives people a chance to realize the plan of their life as a kind of personal identity project; it also enables better adaptation in the rapidly changing reality.

Yet, nowadays, growing up has a reverse side to it, too. Adults are frequently rivals on the job market today, sometimes confused or marginalized in that market, or even excluded from it, no less than the youngest employees or those making a start in their professional roles. The lack of adequate support, not only emotional but also institutional (the neglected or ignored educational role of school) in the process of personal identity formation, building and realizing the plan of one's life, and making first attempts to test one's own independence and autonomy increases the likelihood of experiencing uncertainty and anxiety, increases difficulties in defining one's own identity, and hinders making important life decisions (Luyckx, Schwarz, Goossens, & Pollock, 2008; Brzezińska, Czub, Nowotnik, & Rękosiewicz, 2012); it can be a source of an advancing sense of helplessness (cf. Jarmakowski, 2011). Perhaps this is the reason why some scholars identify groups of young people characterized by a tendency to consciously avoid making commitments typical for adults (Côté, 2000).

The research conducted by Koen Luyckx, Seth J. Schwartz, Luc Goossens, and Sophie Pollock (2008) showed that the sense of being an adult was higher in the group of working people than in students. These results may suggest a positive and pro-development role of taking on adult roles (in this case, the completion of education and the commencement of employment) in perceiving oneself as an adult. Also Jeffrey J. Arnett (2000) asserted that the “yes” answer to the question *Do you feel like you’ve reached adulthood?* is more often given by people who have decided to take on roles typical for the period of adulthood in their culture.

An unquestionable advantage of the way of preparing for adulthood that consists in the young person trying to combine various forms of activity – related to study as well as various forms of work, family, social, and civic life – into a consistent whole is learning to make decisions, consider their possible consequences, as well as to take responsibility for these decisions and to engage in their realization. On the other hand, there is a risk of being overloaded with duties and with excessive expectations of responsibility on the part of one’s closest others, accompanied by the withdrawal of acceptance for forms and areas of exploratory activity as broad as previously. This kind of “closing of paths” can result in the strengthening of adaptive behaviors in this adolescent stage that are not necessarily suited to the challenges awaiting young people in further years of their adulthood.

The articles presented in the current issue were written in several academic centers doing research on identity and its determinants. These were: the Institute of Psychology of the Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University in Warsaw (Jan Cieciuch and Maria Kłym-Guba), the Institute of Psychology of the Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań (Anna I. Brzezińska and Aleksandra Pilarska), the Institute of Psychology of the University of Wrocław (Alicja Senejko and Zbigniew Łoś), and the University of Social Sciences and Humanities (SWPS) – Faculty in Poznań (Elwira Brygoła and Konrad Piotrowski). All the articles are devoted to the issue of identity formation in different stages of life – from the threshold between of childhood and the early phase of adolescence (the paper by Maria Kłym-Guba and Jan Cieciuch), through the subsequent stages of late adolescence and emerging adulthood (the papers by Anna I. Brzezińska and Konrad Piotrowski as well as by Alicja Senejko and Zbigniew Łoś) and the transition between early and middle adulthood (Elwira Brygoła’s paper), to the late phase of adulthood compared to emerging and early adulthood (Aleksandra Pilarska’s paper).

Maria Kłym-Guba and Jan Ciecuch (2016) addressed the problem of changes taking place in the early phase of adolescence in the twelve domains of identity formation they distinguished. This stage of development is particularly important from the point of view of the identity formation process, since it is precisely during the transition from childhood to adolescence, with an increase in self-awareness, that the search for information about oneself and one's functioning intensifies. In this initial phase, this search concerns very numerous and diverse areas, which confirms the idea of distinguishing "exploration in breadth." The participants in the study were students of elementary and middle schools, aged 11-15 years. They were examined three times, at half-year intervals. The authors found significant interindividual differences in the first measurement already, which suggests that the transition from childhood to adolescence should be thought of as a diverse process, taking a different course for different groups of people or even for different individuals. Despite the very short duration of the study (a year between the first and the last measurement), a clear systematic increase in the intensity of exploration was observed in the following domains: outlook on life, work, physical appearance, and boyfriend-girlfriend relationships. These domains can therefore be regarded as particularly important sources of information about oneself and one's place in the world. This result also indicates what may be a sensitive area requiring special care and attention on the part of adults in contacts with young teenagers.

The study conducted by Anna I. Brzezińska and Konrad Piotrowski (2016) among slightly older young people – students of various types of upper-secondary schools – also had a longitudinal character and took two and a half years; the measurements were conducted at six-month intervals, just like in the study by Kłym-Guba and Ciecuch. The aim was to analyze changes in one domain only: attitude towards one's own future. The research by Kłym-Guba and Ciecuch revealed no significant intensification of exploration in the "future" domain in students aged 11-15, although there were significant differences between the students. By contrast, Brzezińska and Piotrowski (using a different method – their own Polish adaptation of DIDS) observed a significant increase in the intensity of exploration in breadth over a period of 2.5 years, but only in general upper-secondary school students. Moreover, they observed an increase in the intensity of other dimensions of identity development in the domain of attitude towards the future: exploration in depth (in-depth exploration) and both dimensions connected with commitment making. A different pattern of change was found in both basic vocational schools and technical upper-secondary schools: namely, a decrease in the intensity of exploration in breadth and in depth

as well as in commitment making, accompanied by an increase in the intensity of ruminative exploration. These results point to the high significance of the quality of educational environment in the second stage of adolescence. What these educational environments mainly differed in was the relationship between learning and taking up work and the related potential opening or closing of activity paths at the threshold of adulthood. When choosing school, students of basic vocational schools were more or less aware that after passing the vocational examination they would enter (or at least they might immediately enter) the job market, whereas students choosing general upper-secondary schools tended to “dismiss” the prospect of taking up work soon after finishing school. Thus, the results show that the quality of environment offers has considerable importance to the activities taken up in the process of identity formation in the domain of visions of oneself in the future.

The significance of what happens around the person forming his or her identity – considered much more broadly, in a macro-perspective – is also pointed out by Alicja Senejko and Zbigniew Łoś (2016). The authors were interested in the relationship between attitude towards globalization among people at the threshold between adolescence and adulthood and in the phase of early adulthood as well as in which style of processing identity problems distinguished by Michael Berzonsky (2012; Berzonsky et al., 2013) dominates in them. They observed that the informative style dominated both in people with a strongly expressed accepting attitude towards globalization and in those with a critical-accepting attitude. A critical attitude towards globalization, combined with a fearful attitude was found in people with a predominance of the normative style. People with a strongly expressed fearful attitude towards globalization typically used the diffuse-avoidant or normative style.

Aleksandra Pilarska (2016) answers the question about the character and stability of the links between the organization of self-structure (the number of self-aspects and the degree of their overlap in terms of content) and the sense of personal identity in different phases of adulthood. The participants in her study were only women, but they represented two age groups: emerging adulthood (19-25 years; the group was similar to the one in the study by Senejko and Łoś) as well as middle adulthood and the beginning of late adulthood (40-74 years). The results obtained by the author revealed significant differences between the two groups of women both in the structure of the self-concept and in the strength of the sense of identity. According to theoretical and empirical reports concerning the developmental trajectories of changes in the self and identity, women in emerging adulthood were found to have more significant self-aspects (roles) than

women in later adulthood, though their self-aspects were less diverse in terms of content. At the same time, older women were characterized by a stronger sense of identity than younger ones. In this context, the results obtained in this study showing that, regardless of the phase of life, the number of roles is marginal to the sense of personal identity while the content interrelatedness of roles significantly promotes that sense turned out not to be obvious. The smaller content overlap of self-aspects observed in women in the later phase of adulthood, accompanied by a stronger sense of identity, suggests that the sense of identity is not a simple function of the structural parameters of the self and provokes questions about the role of individual dispositions or processes underlying the integration of the self-concept, multifaceted and heterogeneous in terms of content.

The transitional stage between the early and middle phases of adulthood was the subject of interest for Elwira Brygoła (2016). The participants in her study were people aged 30-39. The study was aimed at analyzing the interrelations between dimensions of identity development in the domain of attitude towards the future (just like in the study by Brzezińska and Piotrowski) and the formation of the so-called self-authoring personality according to the original theory proposed by Kazimierza Obuchowskiego (Błachnio & Obuchowski, 2011). The obtained results point to positive relationships between the dimensions of commitment making and identification with commitment and the overall level of self-authoring, manifesting itself in the levels of subjectivity, intentionality, meaning in life, and creative adaptation, as well as to a negative relationship between the level of ruminative exploration and the overall level of self-authoring. Moreover, the author found strong associations between the configuration of variables making up the non-self-authoring personality and the configuration of identity development dimensions (identity status) referred to as ruminative moratorium. This study does not answer the question of what role the phase of life plays in identity formation; it only shows the picture of people at a certain stage in life. However, comparing these results with those obtained by Brzezińska and Piotrowski, especially with regard to vocational school students, invites a hypothesis requiring verification in research covering all stages of adulthood and concerning the extent to which entering adulthood with a high level of ruminative exploration (and with the identity status referred to as ruminative moratorium) constitutes a risk factor for the formation of a self-authoring personality, or – alternatively – the extent to which failure to develop a self-authoring personality (for various reasons) increases the level of ruminative exploration.

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